PRESENTATION TO THE

ONTARIO FEDERATION OF LABOUR'S

PUBLIC FORUM

ON UNEMPLOYMENT

THE ACTION GROUP ON THE SOCIAL

CONSEQUENCES OF UNEMPLOYMENT

April 14, 1983

THE SOCIAL PLANNING and RESEARCH COUNCIL of Hamilton and District

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The Action Group on the Social Consequences of Unemployment welcomes the opportunity to address this public forum on unemployment, and congratulates the Ontario Federation of Labour for its continued leadership in providing forums, such as this, in which community dialogue on pressing economic and social issues can occur.

The Action Group was formed by the Social Planning and Research Council Board of Directors following staff dialogue with members of the community. In particular, we would commend the efforts of Bryan Rushton a member of the Hamilton & District Labour Council, and a staff member of the United Way. The Action Group was mandated to:

1) encourage community discussion on the social consequences of unemployment;
2) identify the needs of the unemployed;
3) identify where those needs are not adequately met by services in the community.
4) over the short-term, where there are unmet needs, to identify, encourage and, where necessary, initiate innovative projects, in particular "Self help" projects, designed to assist the unemployed in Hamilton-Wentworth;
5) over the long-term, where there are unmet needs, to recommend to the S.P.R.C. strategies for advocating for resources to meet those needs (whether through existing services or new services);
6) report on a regular basis to the Social Planning and Research Council.

This mandate clearly distinguishes the Action Group's focus on the consequences of unemployment from a focus on job creation.

Job creation, economic recovery and economic solutions are being reviewed by a wide variety of groups in the Region, including the Special Committee on Jobs and the McMaster Secretariat. The Social Planning and Research Council commends these efforts and is prepared to assist and support whenever and wherever possible. In the meantime, however, the Action Group is concerned about the human costs of unemployment and in ensuring that our community responds as effectively as possible to emerging social needs. We are, to the best of our knowledge, the only group in the community attempting to co-ordinate and advocate around how our community responds to the victims of recession.

Our group's membership is broad-based, and includes representatives from:

1. the Social Planning and Research Council
2. the United Way
3. Regional Council
4. Hamilton Psychiatric Hospital
5. the Hamilton & District Labour Council, through the Wage Restraint and Unemployment Co-ordinating Committee
6. Mohawk College
7. the Industry - Education Council
8. the unemployed.

Major resource commitments in terms of staff time and materials are provided by the S.P.R.C.

The Action Group, which has been meeting formally since January, operates on a day-to-day basis through a series of working groups which include professionals with expertise in given fields and, where possible, unemployed persons themselves. These groups are mandated to review and recommend action strategies to the Action Group within given fields. To date, Working Groups in the areas of Housing, Counselling and Information/ Networking have tabled recommendations. An additional group working in

the area of Training, Education and Employment Opportunity is currently formulating recommendations to be tabled in the near future.

On a day-to-day basis, S.P.R.C. staff not only co-ordinate activities, but ensure implementation of recommendations and provide support information and assistance to other groups in the community who are working with the unemployed on a front-line basis. In addition, other S.P.R.C. work in the areas of socio-economic analysis are being integrated into the Action Group's work and informing its deliberations. The S.P.R.C. has, for some time, advocated for a recognition that, Hamilton-Wentworth has entered a period of slow growth, and that it shares, with other communities, a profound structural crisis in employment patterns. The Action Group has been working on these assumptions and has, consequently, looked at strategies and advocacy which recognize a chronically high unemployment rate for probably another decade.

We would like to turn to now, to what the Action Group has discovered, to date, and initiatives which it has undertaken or is currently reviewing.

a) <u>Housing</u>:

The Housing Group systematically reviewed housing needs and problems of the unemployed and discovered two key issues:

1) while there are concerns regarding families losing their homes, to date, there has not emerged in this community a trend towards crisis in home ownership.

2) Housing for youth with a non-therapeutic base is extremely difficult to find.

These two factors led to four major initiatives emerging from work done by the Housing group.

Over the long-term, the S.P.R.C. has been advised to advocate for an increase in the supply of assisted housing units and co-operative housing projects with an emphasis on units targeted at youth. While the S.P.R.C. has for some time, recognized that there is a crisis in assisted family housing and need for greatly expanded housing programmes, this current economic slump has highlighted, in particular in our community, the lack of affordable housing for unemployed youth, whether emergency or long-term in nature.

The Action Group is dialoguing with local churches in an attempt to encourage their sponsorship of "kitchen showers", which would result in the collection and distribution of basic goods necessary for setting up housekeeping. Potential distribution points for such goods have been identified, and negotiations are underway to ensure goods get out to people who require them.

The Action Group also strongly endorsed the need for 'no frills" emergency housing for youth. As a result of this decision, a submission was prepared for the City's Special Committee on Jobs, and the City ultimately decided to apply for COED funding to staff and operate such a facility. We are still awaiting a final decision on this initiative.

Finally, while there may not <u>yet</u> be a strong trend toward loss of homes among the unemployed, the Housing Group recognized that this trend may yet emerge. The Action Group has recommended appropriate authorities, undertake the establishment of an on-going housing monitoring mechanism. We know that waiting lists for co-op and assisted housing are ponderously long and that our community needs to know, as quickly as possible, when problems in housing due to lay-offs and shut downs occur so that remedial action may be taken as quickly as possible.

The whole area of assisted and co-op housing has been a priority for the S.P.R.C., and work and advocacy in this area is ongoing. The work of the Action Group has brought to light the critical need for a focus on the housing problems of youth where the unemployment rate is so severe.

b) Counselling:

Common knowledge would suggest that with massive unemployment, there would be a corresponding rise in the demand for service in community agencies. In fact, this has not happened.

Our counselling group reviewed caseload statistics from agencies and discovered that generally there was no significant rise in demand for service. Several factors should be noted in this regard.

First, some agencies have indicated that while their caseloads have not risen, the complexity of cases with which they are dealing has increased. Second, in some cases, funding cutbacks or loss of staff has meant an increase in client waiting time. Third, many agencies have indicated an increasing number of requests for what might be called instrumental assistance (housing, food, clothing, et cetera). In most cases, this has meant referral to a more appropriate agency.

Instrumental assistance and, more particularly, advocacy has, in fact, been the one area where demand seems to have increased. This has still not manifested itself as heavily as it might in "traditional" agencies due, in part, to newly emerging services, such as the Labour Council's HELP Centre and Local 1005's Fight Back Committee which, in instances, are picking up some of these cases.

There has been considerable discussion locally regarding the failure of caseloads to reflect conventional thinking. There are no definitive answers, but it is worth briefly sharing some of this thinking. First, what we are seeing now with regard to unemployment has no historical precedent, and most predictions regarding help seeking have been prefaced on unemployment occuring in a relatively "healthy" economy. Put another way, since this is a new phenomenon, we don't know what might or might not happen.

Another suggestion is that we are still in the middle of a "lag" between loss of job and human impact at an individual level. This is only further exacerbated by constant government and media pronouncements to the effect that recovery is just around the corner: many victims of unemployment believe, therefore, that their unemployment is temporary. We, at the S.P.R.C. believe, to the contrary, that we will, in fact, see a basic shift and a rise in chronic unemployment, at least over the next 5 to 10 years. The hope of individual victims that they will find employment may, therefore, act as a buffer.

There has also been suggestions made that, in this crisis, family and neighbours may be acting as more effective supports than in the past. All of these suggested reasons are speculative and, to the best of our knowledge, there has been no research in the area to back up any of the arguments. They are, however, worth considering.

The Action Group has received recommendations some of which it would like to share here.

The first relates to funding for human services. Restraint-minded funding policies over the last 4 or 5 years have forced most human services to pare to the bone already. There is no fat left.

Many are under-staffed and any increase in caseloads will strain their capacity to respond beyond the breaking point. In a time of high unemployment, funding for human services must not be cut back. The Action Group has therefore asked that the S.P.R.C. assume as an immediate priority the role of advocate for funding of human services. While this has been a traditional function of the S.P.R.C., the urgency for sound advocacy now will dictate increased Board and staff involvement with other agencies in advocating for effective funding.

Advocacy is however, not limited to agencies, and there is an increasing need for more advocacy on behalf of and in co-operation with individuals. The massive expansion in U.I.C. and General Welfare caseloads has been paralleled by an increasing need for advocacy. Further, as new advocacy services emerge there is a need for information exchange on the issues confronted, problems faced and strategies used by individual advocates. The Action Group has highlighted its support for effective advocacy and is working with relevant groups to establish an ongoing forum for information exchange among advocates in the community.

Finally, because conventional agencies limit budget counselling to those in a debt crisis, the Action Group is exploring the establishment of a volunteer-staffed budget assistance service. This service would be geared to those who are unemployed and require assistance learning to budget in reduced financial circumstances.

c) Information/Networking:

Cutting across all working groups was an acknowledgement that the unemployed need access to information on the services and

assistance which is available to them. Through its Information Group, the Action Group will be publishing an information pamphlet once funding is secured. What is important about this pamphlet is that its distribution has been planned on the basis that to be effective, it must get to the unemployed. To this end, local Canada Employment Centres and U.I.C., our local General Welfare offices and advocacy services have agreed to operate as distribution points. We hope to have this pamphlet available in May.

d) Training, Education and Employment Opportunities:

This group has met twice and has not yet formulated its recommendations. In some ways, it has had the most complex set of tasks, for it is at the level of training and education that the structural crisis in the economy is confronted head on.

This was reflected in a survey of agencies conducted by a student on placement with the S.P.R.C. Asked to assess gaps in services to the unemployed, the most frequently cited gaps, were in the areas of education, training, job-search techniques et cetera. While not yet completed, the results from this survey point out the critical need for such services to be attuned to the needs of the unemployed and the economy both.

e) Conclusions:

The Action Group is mandated to review its work and accomplishments in June with a view to assessing if it should continue and/or expand its activities in other areas.

One of the major issues to be tackled is the issue of co-ordination. Many smaller groups are undertaking initiatives

on their own. Our concern is that these groups be aware of each other in order to avoid unnecessary duplication and to ensure that particular groups of needs in our community are not overlooked.

In speaking here tonight, it is the wish of members of the Action Group to underscore the need for parallel initiatives: job creation and economic recovery initiatives must go hand-in-hand with measures which ensure that the victims of unemployment have access to the services which they require. We know that the Ontario Federation of Labour shares this concern, and look forward to our continuing work with the labour movement in ensuring this goal is reached.